DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 409 830 IR 018 346

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TITLE	New Connections for Scholars: The Changing Missions of a Learned Society in an Era of Digital Networks. ACLS Occasional Paper No. 36.
INSTITUTION	American Council of Learned Societies, New York, N.Y.
REPORT NO	ISSN-1041-536X
PUB DATE	97
NOTE	16p.; Paper originally presented at the Annual Meeting of the Center for Research Libraries (April 19, 1996).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Freedom; Change Agents; Collegiality; Computer Mediated Communication; Higher Education; *Institutional Role; *Intellectual Disciplines; Intellectual Property; *Peer Relationship; Preservation; *Professional Associations; Professional Development; Scholarly Journals; Scholarship; Standards; *Technological Advancement
IDENTIFIERS	Digital Technology; Information Age; Networks (Persons); Professional Identity; *Scholarly Communication; Standardization

ABSTRACT

New digital technologies will allow long-standing missions of learned societies to be performed in new ways. Modern learned societies are national networks of scholars and educators with professional interests in a single field or discipline. This document discusses functions of learned societies including: identity (formal recognition for one's field of study as well as individual professional identity for members); information sharing and communication among members; scholarly publications; and professional services (directories of members, job listings, and guides to graduate study). Other topics include: the context of disconnection among scholars in higher education; the changing roles of learned societies in a digital age; and roles for the American Council of Learned Societies. Critical issues identified for assuring optimal usage of connections made more easily with digital technology are: quality and integrity; common formats and standards; preservation; intellectual property; and academic freedom. Learned societies are well-positioned to use new technology to contribute to significant changes underway in the world of scholarship and higher education involving internationalization, interdisciplinarity, and interactive learning. (SWC)

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ED 409 830

NEW CONNECTIONS FOR SCHOLARS:

The Changing Missions of a Learned Society in an Era of Digital Networks

Douglas C. Bennett

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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American Council of Learned Societies

ACLS OCCASIONAL PAPER, No. 36

ISSN 1041-536X

IR018346

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New Connections for Scholars: The Changing Missions of a Learned Society in an Era of Digital Networks[1]

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What are the missions of a learned society in an era of digital networks?

At the American Council of Learned Societies, we believe the technologies of digital networks will plow up and replant the worlds of scholarship and education. We believe these technologies can serve us well if we take care in making the transition to using them. But we also believe they may do great damage if we are inattentive or timid or simply dazzled by the technology. Helping to make the transition to digital networks in the humanities and social sciences is one of our main concerns at the ACLS.

For a gathering in November [1996], we asked the executive directors of the 56 learned societies that then belonged to the ACLS to prepare brief essays on what they perceived to be the mission of their learned society in an electronic age. My remarks are informed by this collection of essays and our subsequent discussion of them, but the views expressed are my own.

In brief course I want to argue the following. The new technology will allow long-standing missions of learned societies to be performed in new ways, but the missions of learned societies are also likely to be altered. There are significant changes afoot in the world of scholarship and higher education involving internationalization, interdisciplinarity, and interactive learning. Learned societies are unusually well-positioned to use the new technology to contribute to these changes.

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[1] The text that follows was originally presented at the Annual Meeting of the Center for Research Libraries, April 19, 1996.

The History and Missions of Learned Societies

Thirteen learned societies joined together in 1919 to create the American Council of Learned Societies. Today we have 58 member societies and the number continues to grow. Our purpose is the "advancement of humanistic studies in all fields of learning in the humanities and social sciences and the maintenance and strengthening of relations among the national societies devoted to such studies."

The characteristics of learned societies today are best seen by contrasting them with what preceded modern learned societies. Learned societies formed before the Civil War were:

- place-based;
- gatherings across a range of professions of all learned people;
- focused on the full breadth of specific fields of knowledge.

Many of these early learned societies had meeting halls; many also had cabinets or collections of valuable objects. Though quite transformed today, three of these earliest learned societies are members of ACLS. The American Philosophical Society (Philadelphia, founded 1743) and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Boston, 1780) are now prestigious honorary societies whose reach is not just national but international. The American Antiquarian Society (Worcester, 1812) also has only honorary members, but today is principally a major independent research library.

Modern learned societies, by contrast, are:

- national;
- networks of scholars and educators;
- with professional interests in a single field or discipline.

A large number of learned societies were founded between the Civil War and World War I. Founded during this period were (among others) virtually all of those in the disciplines included among the standard humanities and social science departments of colleges and universities. The learned societies founded after World War I add several additional fields, most notably those concerned with the arts as well as interdisciplinary concerns with particular areas of the world or with particular centuries or eras.

We can categorize the functions of modern learned societies as principally these four:

Identity. Learned societies provide identity in a double sense: the existence of a learned society gives formal recognition to a field of study. At the same time, scholars acquire an individual professional identity as members of the field by belonging to one or more learned societies.

Informal communication. Second, learned societies organize informal scholarly communication in their field of study: they provide a setting for conversations among scholars across the country. Annual meetings are a principal mechanism for this informal communication, but hardly the only one.

Scholarly publication. Most learned societies publish a journal. Although other journals in the same field may be published by commercial or not-for-profit publishers, typically learned societies publish the oldest and most prestigious journal in their field, often the one broadest in scope.

Professional services. Finally, most learned societies have come to provide an array of professional services for their members. For example they create directories of members, provide job listing services, and publish guides to graduate study in their field.

A Context of Disconnection

In all these missions, learned societies establish and maintain connections: connections among scholars across a large number of institutions, and connections between these scholars and a broad array of resources for research, teaching, and other professional activities. This is particularly worth noting here because the context within which scholars work is characterized much less by connection than by fragmentation and separation. In this context of disconnection, learned societies are an unusual countervailing institution.

It is one of the glories of the American system of higher education that colleges and universities are separate from one another; even public institutions in the same state are rarely more than loosely coordinated. This separateness allows for initiative and for responsiveness to local needs or concerns, but it also prevents benefits that can only be provided by individuals or institutions working together.

Moreover, this separateness ramifies throughout the academy. Within colleges and universities, departments function largely independently of one another both in their educational programs and in their research activities. Even courses within institutions are largely separate domains, with professors rarely aware of what others are doing. Libraries at individual colleges and universities collect separately to meet the needs of their faculty and students. One other obvious but remarkable aspect of this "context of disconnection" bears mention: the sharp separation of scholars from the general public.

U.S. higher education is struggling with this disconnectedness on a number of fronts. Many colleges and universities have been exploring ways of overcoming the fragmentation of their education into separate programs and separate courses through core curricula and other integrated programs. Faculty in separate departments and disciplines are being linked through interdisciplinary programs. Libraries are increasingly trying to share resources with one another via interlibrary loan and cooperative collection agreements. Universities are exploring ways of building stronger bridges to their surrounding communities.

Both because they are important and because they are issues where learned societies may make unusual contributions, I want to make particular if brief mention of three other ways in which the worlds of scholarship and higher education are striving to achieve greater connectedness.

Internationalization. In many fields, we can see efforts to move beyond insular or parochial intellectual perspectives that over-focus on experiences within the United States or the experiences of dominant groups. Drawing on this and also reinforcing it are efforts to"internationalize the curriculum."

Interdisciplinarity. In virtually every field of learning one can see a striving for greater discourse across traditional disciplinary boundaries. Scholars in one field are drawing on perspectives and methods from a range of other fields (e.g., literature scholars interested in images and ways of analyzing images), and hybrid multidisciplinary fields are forming.

Interactive learning and scholarship. A third change is a move towards more interactive and collaborative strategies of teaching and learning.

Lectures are being supplanted by approaches that expect more active effort by students or ask them to work in groups. This change is paralleled by new styles of scholarship involving greater collaboration.

The Changing Roles of Learned Societies in a Digital Age

A common denominator in these three frontier issues is that they involve new, richer, or more extended ways of making connections. Internationalization, interdisciplinarity, and interactive learning are changes working their way through the academy.

It is important to note that these aspirations for connectedness arise independently of the technology of digital networks, but in this new technology we have fresh, powerful means for making and strengthening connections of all kinds. And learned societies are unusually well positioned to make effective use of this technology on behalf of these aspirations.

The possibilities are significant enough that each of the core functions of a learned society is likely to undergo significant change. We can organize consideration of these changes under the same headings we used earlier for the missions of learned societies. Taken together, however, the changes involve a significant refocusing of mission; we are unlikely simply to see the same activities performed by new means.

Identity. The new technology will surely hasten the transformation of learned societies from national to international organizations. This is the clearest change in the function of learned societies to shape scholarly identities. Digital networks allow learned societies to stay in touch with, to connect and to serve members across the globe.

Informal communication. The new technology will also reshape scholarly identities by refashioning informal scholarly communication into more plural interdisciplinary channels. Learned societies have traditionally organized informal scholarly communication within their individual fields through annual meetings, sub-field sections, and newsletters. These means also inhibited cross-field communication, however, by confining scholarly communication to those who attend a society's annual meeting or subscribe to particular newsletters. While digital networks provide new means for organizing such within-field informal communication, they also provide powerful means for fostering

informal communication across fields and disciplines. Listservs can be created that draw subscribers from several scholarly fields; participants can learn of new publications and work in progress in several different disciplines. Scholars need not confine themselves to one or two established networks in which to participate, but rather can tailor their sources of information and networks of colleagues to suit their particular and evolving interests. Scholarly identities may become much more varied as a consequence.

One other important potential change in informal communication should also be noted: the technology of digital networks could be used to allow more extensive and effective communication between scholars and non-scholars, between experts and a variety of publics. Learned societies might tailor access to scholarly resources for journalists, policy-makers, organizational leaders, and others with an interest in knowledge. I believe it is too early to say whether learned societies will take advantage of this potential, which might have very far reaching implications for the relationship between the academy and the world.

Scholarly publication. Digital networks will make possible electronic journals: this is probably the most frequently noted implication of the new technology for learned societies. Electronic journals promise faster and better access to new scholarship, and electronic journals are likely to be different in form from print journals in important ways. While none of the learned societies that belong to ACLS have yet begun publishing an electronic journal, several are already beginning the transition, and virtually all are exploring how they may do this.

As important as the coming of electronic journals will be, the technology makes possible a more momentous change in the role of learned societies with regard to formal scholarly publication. ***They may now validate and organize scholarly resources in their fields.***

Generally, learned societies publish the lead journal in their field; occasionally they publish more than one, but seldom more than two or three. In many fields, other publishers (university presses, commercial publishers) have come to establish additional journals. The journals published by learned societies commonly provide the most extensive array of book reviews in the field. In a few cases (but only a few), learned societies produce abstracts or bibliographies of works in their field. Rarely does the role of a learned society in scholarly publication go beyond this at the present time.

As digital networks become more central to scholarly communication, scholars are increasingly facing a torrent of electronically accessible resources, many of unknown provenance or quality. The challenge and the opportunity for learned societies is to assess the quality of these resources through peer review, to provide these assessments to scholars in the field, and to organize access to the full range of validated materials in an easily navigated, intellectually thoughtful manner.

Learned societies do not have to publish everything in their field to validate and organize what is available. The new technology allows anyone to design an organizing lattice and provide pointers to resources published by others. Learned societies are best situated to perform this role because they are best able to organize the peer review process by which resources should be assessed.

In performing this new role, a learned society would likely draw current and potential members more closely to it as a critical site of orientation for them. This prospect provides an important incentive to take on this new role. By the same token, if learned societies do not validate and organize scholarly resources in their fields, some other entity will fill this need—a library, a university department, a publisher, a self-identified group of individuals. That "other entity" could become such a key point of reference for scholars in the field that it would begin to supplant the learned society as what defines the field for its practitioners.

Professional services. Many of the professional services now provided by learned societies can and likely will be provided in the future in electronic form. It will be possible to join or renew membership, post or search job listings, search membership directories, or order handbooks and other publications online. Again, these are important, inevitable, but, I believe, ordinary changes made possible by the technology of digital networks.

In the area of professional services, the extraordinary possibility for change lies in how learned societies may become more deeply involved in serving their members as teachers, both in colleges and universities and in K-12 settings. Much more effectively than ever before, learned societies can provide searchable archives of syllabi and other teaching materials; they can also consider participating in the design of interactive teaching resources. The professional and pre-professional networks which learned societies constitute could become a key context for interactive learning. These networks could become vital educational settings beyond the classroom or the campus.

The strength of the new technology is that it allows connections to be easily made. This can also be a source of problems, however: connections that can be made quickly can be made poorly or foolishly. A vital role of learned societies is to see that the technology is used well for purposes of education and scholarship. Among the issues that need to be addressed in assuring optimal usage are these:

Quality and integrity. If a scholar or student finds a text on a World Wide Web site, can s/he be confident that the text is accurate and complete? If there is more than one variant or edition, can s/he know which one is being provided? The scholarly world has developed strategies for assurance of quality that are rooted in peer review. How can these be carried over into the digital world?

Common formats and standards. Over many decades, the scholarly world has worked out formats and standards for print resources that facilitate their use. Title pages, indexes, footnotes: these and many related features allow scholars to have common bearings in an intellectual world. Only some of these can have direct analogues in the digital world; how will we find our bearings in a digital world?

Preservation. If a scholar provides a citation to a book or article provided online, can s/he be sure that a reader can follow the citation to the source? Beyond the reliability of the site or pathway, can s/he be sure the cited work will be available in some form for the foreseeable future? How will we assure the long-term preservation of digital resources?

Intellectual property. Copyright law involves carefully devised balances between the rights of proprietors and the rights of users. These balances establish the rewards that flow to those who create or disseminate new intellectual or creative works, and also establish the terms of access for those who make use of them. Many aspects of the current balance rest upon particular features of the print world; a new scheme is being devised for digital networks. What will be the balance, the rewards and the terms of access, that govern scholarship and education in this digital world?

Academic freedom. Finally, we need to be concerned with how academic freedom can be protected in this new setting. To a certain degree, the separation of colleges and universities from wider publics has made it easier to sustain a greater degree of freedom for the

expression of ideas in scholarly circles. As the new technology makes it easy for anyone to gain access to scholarly conversations, we can expect renewed challenges to the ideals of academic freedom.

These are not issues for learned societies to address alone. They concern all who participate in the symbiotic relationships of scholarly communication: libraries, primary and secondary publishers, colleges and universities as well as scholars and scholarly societies. They are also issues that learned societies could choose to ignore over the past few decades because they involve arrangements of long standing in the print world—arrangements worked out before many learned societies had even been formed. In a world of digital networks, however, all these issues must be addressed again. And in addressing them again, it is important that learned societies—as the organized voices of scholarly communities—be centrally involved.

Roles for the American Council of Learned Societies

Learned societies are unusually well positioned to help the world of scholarship and education embrace digital, networked technology. Their role has always involved making connections across institutions and distances. This technology now provides them with powerful new means to forge connections across borders and disciplines as well. The American Council of Learned Societies was created to help learned societies in the humanities and social sciences work together more effectively, and to pursue their common interests and those of the scholars they represent. In the transition to using digital, networked technology, ACLS will focus on the following tasks:

First, we will help the learned societies incorporate digital, networked technology into their regular activities. We will help them find the best way to use this technology in publishing journals and newsletters, renewing memberships, registering participants for annual meetings, and providing services to members. We will also help our learned societies explore ways of working together in these activities, both to develop common approaches and to help reduce the investments in infrastructure they will have to incur.

Second, we will work on developing mechanisms for providing access for scholars, teachers and students to scholarly and educational resources via digital networks. Many of our member learned societies have created World Wide Web sites (or gophers), and more are following suit

each month. ACLS has created a website of its own (http://www.acls.org) providing pointers to all of these.

If it is a role for each learned society to validate and organize scholarly resources in its field, ACLS has an important function in linking these resources and providing gateways for access. In partnership with Vassar College and the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI), ACLS is developing the American Arts and Letters Network (http://www.aaln.org), an experimental, quality-filtered website providing access to scholarly resources identified through a peer review process. The AALN site also has a sophisticated search engine by which scholars, teachers and students can locate appropriate resources.

Third, more broadly, we will work with others to construct a digital environment that provides access to all cultural resources in networked form. With two dozen other not-for-profit organizations—representing museums, libraries, archives, schools, colleges and universities—we recently created the National Initiative for a Networked Cultural Heritage (NINCH). NINCH, which also maintains a website (http://www-ninch.cni.org), will provide a forum for working out common concerns, for mounting key projects, and for cooperating with parallel efforts in other countries.

Fourth, in helping to provide access to resources in the arts, humanities and social sciences, we will work to keep a steady focus on how these digital networked resources can be provided with reliable quality and integrity; how common formats, gateways, and standards can be developed; how the preservation of digital resources over the long term can be assured; how the balances between the rights of users and of providers under copyright law can be protected; and how academic freedom can be respected.

Finally, we will help settle the new technology into the professional mores of scholarly communities. Providing access to a wealth of resources will not be enough, even if these resources are provided well. Use of digital resources cannot simply be the preserve of scholars who work to one side of the mainstream in their fields. And digital resources will not be well provided if they are nothing more than simple analogues of print resources. The technology opens the door to new strategies of inquiry, new modes for scholarly communication, and new options for teaching and learning which should find their way into the central activities of scholarly communities.

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